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ABSTRACT

In this study, reasoning about moral responsibilities in friendships on the part of 97 subjects was assessed at the ages of 7, 9, 12, and 15 years. Assessment was undertaken of: (1) general reasoning about the moral obligation of promise keeping; (2) general reasoning about responsibilities in friendship; and (3) situation-specific reasoning about promise keeping and close friendship in a conflict between best friends involving promise keeping. Interview data were collected and analyzed. Results indicated that knowledge about promise keeping develops before a general understanding of closeness in friendship. Promise keeping is used as both a practical and a moral reason in decision making from an early age. Friendship is used as a practical reason from an early age, while its use as a moral reason develops later. There was a marked developmental trend towards establishing consistency between moral judgment and action choice, which peaked at age 15. A list of 15 references is included. (BC)

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The development of moral responsibility in friendship[1]

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Abstract

In a longitudinal study of 97 subjects at ages 7, 9, 12 and 15 years, assessment was undertaken of: a) general knowledge about the meaning of promise-keeping and close friendship and b) the application of this knowledge to an action dilemma involving promise-keeping to a best friend. Results show that knowledge about promise-keeping develops ahead of general understanding of closeness in friendship at all measurement occasions. Promise-keeping is used as a practical reason in decision-making as well as a moral reason from early on. Friendship is used as a practical reason from early on while its use as a moral reason lags behind. A marked developmental trend was observed towards establishing consistency between moral judgment and action choice, with the peak reached at age 15. The experience of obligations in relationships is seen as a motivational force in the establishment of consistency between moral judgment and action choice.

The development of moral responsibility in relationships

This paper deals with two types of obligations which have been differentiated in the literature (e.g. Blum, 1980): strictly *moral obligations* referring to moral duties and *responsibilities in relationships* referring to concerns about the well-being of another person. These two types of obligations have been dealt with as elements of justice concepts (Kohlberg, 1976) as contrasted with empathy and prosocial concerns or conceptions of care (e.g. Eisenberg, 1982; Gilligan, 1982; Hoffman, 1984) (see Table 1). Compared to the amount of research on the development of understanding of moral obligations derived from moral duties, the number of studies concerned with the development of responsibilities derived from the experience of being in a close relationship is small indeed.

We are specifically interested in the development of responsibilities in friendship. Friendship represents an interesting type of relationship since it is assumed that the development of interpersonal sensitivity and of a sense of self are constituted through processes of strong affective bonding to a friend (Krappmann, 1991; Sullivan, 1953). To cite Blum, "friendship characterizes a special moral relationship of concern and care for another person which is built upon a basis of knowledge, trust and intimacy and in which one comes to have a close identification with the good of another person" (1980, 69). The research on the development of friendship (Damon, 1977; Keller, 1984; Selman, 1980; Youniss, 1980) gives some cues that such a moral understanding of friendship is an achievement of adolescence where the self feels as part of the relationship and has established an intimate sharing with and commitment to the friend. Thus, the development of moral responsibility appears to be the other side of the development of emotional intimacy in personal relationships.

The research presented here will show how children come to understand friendship as a moral relationship and thus contribute to this symposium's focus on morality in close relationships.

2. Method and sample

In a longitudinal study, reasoning about moral obligations and responsibilities in relationships was assessed in 97 subjects (45 female, 52 male) successively at the ages 7, 9, 12, 15. The following aspects were addressed (see Table 1):

(a) General reasoning about the moral obligation of promise-keeping (what does it mean to promise something, why in general must a promise be kept, what are the consequences of not keeping a promise?)

(b) General reasoning about responsibilities in close friendship (What makes friendship really close? What is most important in close friendship?).

(c) Situation-specific reasoning about promise-keeping and close friendship in a conflict between best friends involving promise-keeping.

This conflict was based upon Selman's (1980) friendship dilemma in which the protagonist promised to meet the best friend at a certain time. For this very time the protagonist later receives an attractive invitation from a third child who has recently moved into the neighborhood. Various psychological details complicate matters, for example that it is the friends' usual meeting day, that the friend wants to talk about personal problems, and that he does not like the new child.

The conflict is reconstructed with regard to the following aspects: definition of the problem, descriptive social and prescriptive moral reasoning about the action choice, consequences of choice and regulative strategies to avoid or rebalance consequences.

3. Analysis of data

The interview data were analyzed with regard to level of cognitive organization and content of reasoning (Table 2).

3.1. Analysis of cognitive levels of reasoning

Developmental levels of cognitive differentiation and integration of arguments were determined within each of the three different contexts. Levels are constructed such that equivalent criteria are defined across different contexts (see Table 3). The definition of levels draws on the literature on social-cognitive and moral development (e.g. Damon, 1977; Colby and Kohlberg, 1987; Gibbs & Widaman, 1982; Selman, 1980; Youniss, 1980). Levels vary from the lowest level 0 to the highest level 3 with transitional levels (e.g., 0/1, 1/2, 2/3). Interrater agreement on sublevels in the different age groups varied between 75% and 90% (Keller, 1984; Keller & Edelstein, 1990; Keller & Wood, 1989).

3.2. Analysis of content of reasoning

Independent of level of cognitive complexity, content of reasoning was analyzed to assess reasons guiding action choice and moral judgment of choice in situation-specific reasoning about the action dilemma. For the present analysis three types of reasons were taken into account (Table 4): (a) formal moral reasons referring to the obligation to keep the promise, (b) interpersonal reasons referring to responsibilities in relationships, c) reasons referring to both formal moral and interpersonal aspects, and d) self-related or egoistic reasons referring to subjective preferences. Interrater reliabilities for content categories across age groups vary around 90%.

4. Results

4.1. Analysis of developmental levels across contexts of reasoning

The first analysis addresses the question of intraindividual differences in developmental levels of reasoning from age 7 through 15 years across the three different contexts of general and situation-specific reasoning. Figure 1 shows that development of formal moral reasoning about promise-keeping is more advanced than reasoning about

general and situation-specific reasoning. Figure 1 shows that development of formal moral reasoning about promise-keeping is more advanced than reasoning about responsibilities in close friendship. The mean differences are statistically significant at each point of measurement. In addition, prediction analysis (Hildebrand, Laing & Rosenthal, 1977) demonstrates that the pattern evidenced for the means holds true within each person as well. Thus, reasoning about the formal moral obligation of promise-keeping is shown to be developmentally ahead of reasoning about responsibilities in close friendship.

With regard to situation-specific reasoning about the friendship dilemma, the results show the developmental level to be more closely related to formal moral reasoning at ages 7 and 9 years while it is related more closely to friendship reasoning at ages 12 and 15 years (Figure 1).

4.2. Analysis of content of situation-specific reasoning

The next analysis addresses the question how formal moral and interpersonal arguments are applied in situation-specific reasoning about the action conflict. Content analysis was performed on two types of reasons addressing motives and moral justifications: First, reasons given for the action choice to go to the friend in terms of descriptive social reasoning (Why does A want to do X) and, second, reasons given in the moral justification of the action choice (What is the right choice in this situation? Why is this the right choice?) (Table 2).

Figure 2 shows the use of the content categories across the age groups and across the two contexts of practical and moral reasoning about the action choice. We shall point out the most salient effects only: Not surprisingly the two younger age groups make the most frequent use of non-moral reasons. In *practical reasoning* about the choice (why the protagonist would opt for the friend) the three moral and interpersonal categories are about equally distributed among the 7, 9 and 12 year olds. Only among the 15 year olds the use of formal moral reasons decreases substantively. In the analysis of *moral justifications* of the choice, the 7 year olds were not included because this question was often not asked or not answered in this age group. Formal moral reasons are used most frequently among the 9 and 12 year olds with a substantive decrease in the 15 year olds. Interpersonal and formal moral reasons are rareley mentioned by 9 year olds but they

represent the most substantive category among the 15 year olds. Thus, these results document that in moral reasoning about an action choice children become first aware of the formal moral obligation and only later coordinate moral obligations with obligations that stem from the relationship.

4.3. Age, developmental level and and action choice in the dilemma

The last analysis explores the relationship of direction of choice to age and developmental level of reasoning. Nearly all subjects from age 7 onwards take it to be the morally right choice to go to the friend. In contradistinction, there is a highly significant correlation between age and direction of practical choice (Figure 3). Older subjects increasingly opt for the friend and especially among the 15 year olds there is is a strong conformity in direction of choice. The same relationship holds true for developmental level of reasoning where especially at the highest levels 2-3 and 3 the vast majority of subjects opts for the friend.

5. Conclusions

To summarize, our findings document how children in the course of development increasingly become aware of responsibilities resulting from the fact of being in an close friendship. As responsibilities in friendship are less explicitly defined than is the case for moral duties, children's understanding of responsibilities in friendships lags behind in development. In situation-specific reasoning younger subjects in their interpretation of the dilemma draw first on the formal moral obligation of the promise given, while only later the relationship itself gains obligatoriness from a moral point of view. The results also show that the various types of reasons are used differently in descriptive and prescriptive reasoning about the action choice. In prescriptive reasoning, formal moral and interpersonal reasons are coordinated in adolescence, when the higher levels of reasoning are developed and both promise-keeping and closeness in friendship are interpreted in terms of trust and faithfulness. In adolescence, obligations and responsibilities achieve their most salient function to guide the action choice in the situation presented. Thus, it appears to be a major achievement of adolescence to develop both a relationship self that feels intimately connected to a friend and a moral self that feels responsible for one's commitments and for the welfare of a close friend.

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Table 1

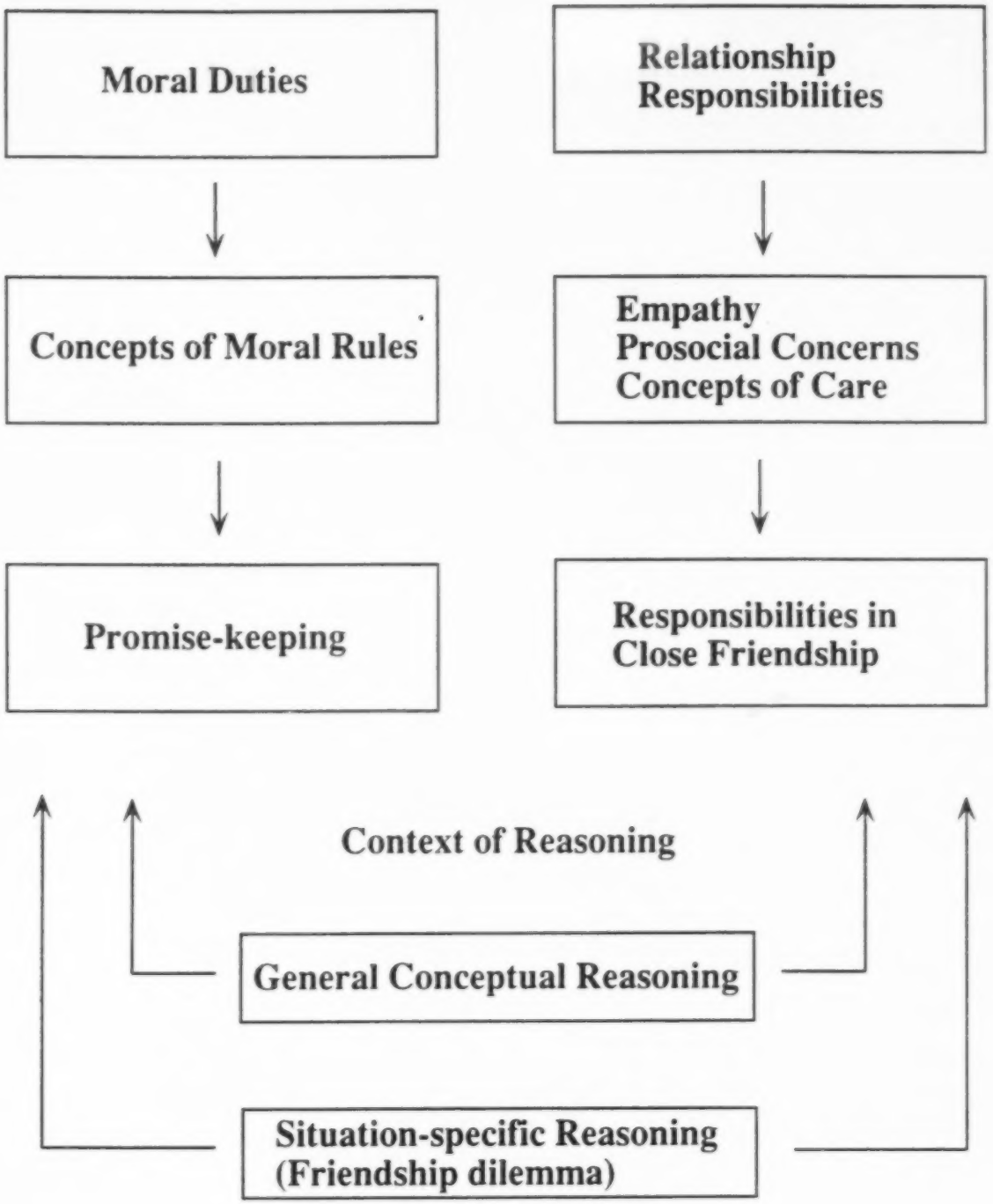

Moral Duties
Relationship Responsibilities
Concepts of Moral Rules
Empathy
Prosocial Concerns
Concepts of Care
Promise-keeping
Responsibilities in Close Friendship
Context of Reasoning
General Conceptual Reasoning
Situation-specific Reasoning (Friendship dilemma)

Table 2

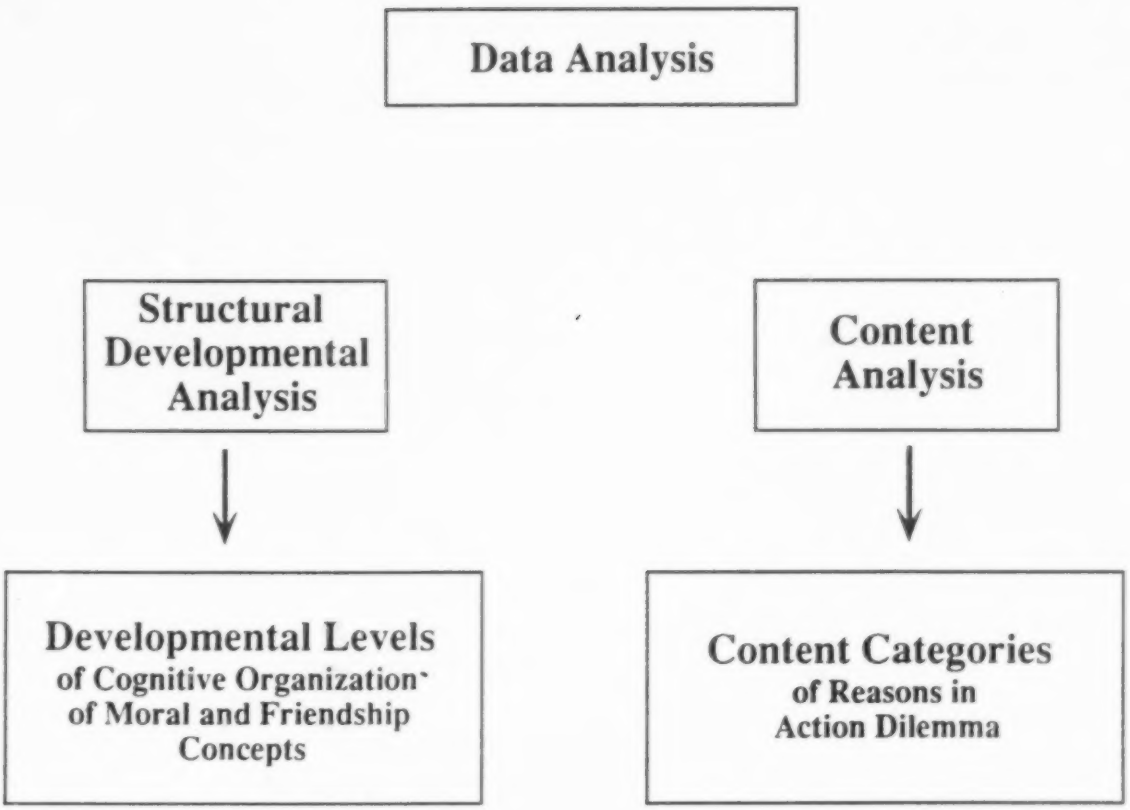

Data Analysis
Structural Developmental Analysis
Content Analysis
Developmental Levels of Cognitive Organization of Moral and Friendship Concepts
Content Categories of Reasons in Action Dilemma
General Reasoning
- Promise Concept
- Friendship Closeness
Situation-specific reasoning
- Action Dilemma
Situation-specific Reasoning
- Reasons for Practical Choice
- Moral Justification of Choice

Table 3

Developmental Levels of Socio-moral Reasoning

Level	Differentiation and Coordination of Perspectives	Promise Concept	Friendship Closeness	Situation-specific Reasoning about Action Dilemma
1	subjective	rule obedience/sanctions	interaction/sharing/ liking	Promise: prenormative Friendship: liking to play playing often/not wanting friend to feel bad
2	coordinated/self-reflective	normative/ interpersonal-psychological consequences	time dimension/ support/ expectability	Promise: bad to betray/not to be promisebreaker Friendship: always meeting this time/knowing friend so long/not wanting friend to feel left out
3	generalized	norm of reciprocity moral self/trust	norm of reciprocity relationship self/ intimacy/loyalty	Promise: bad conscience if not keeping promise/ betraying trust Friendship: knowing friend so well/ not violating trust/ faithfulness

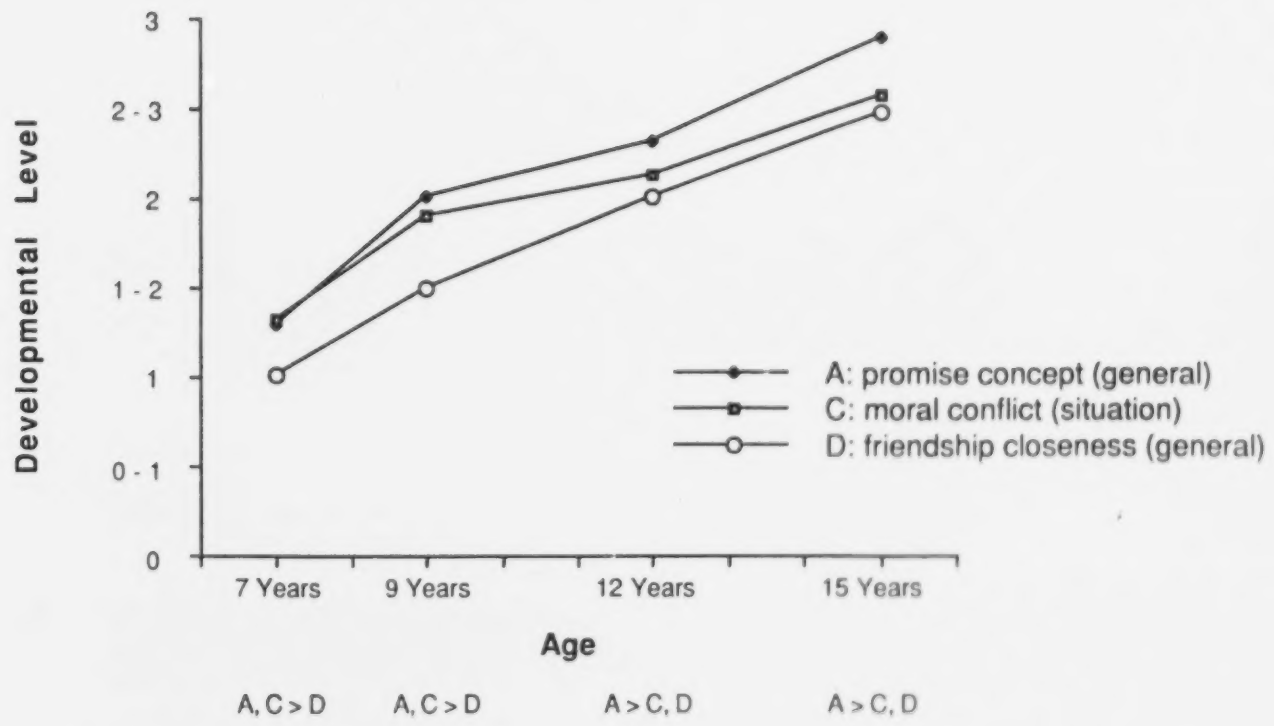
Table 4

Content Categories of Reasons in Friendship Dilemma

1. Self-related:	liking to play with toys
2. Formal moral:	having promised bad to betray promise not be promise-breaker having obliged oneself
3. Interpersonal:	wanting to be with friend always meeting friend at this time having known friend so long/well trusting friend/not destroying trust wanting to talk about problems
4. Formal moral and interpersonal:	reasons from categories 2 and 3

Figure 1

Development of General and Situationspecific Moral and Friendship Reasoning



Scheffe-Tests: $p < .05$

Figure 2

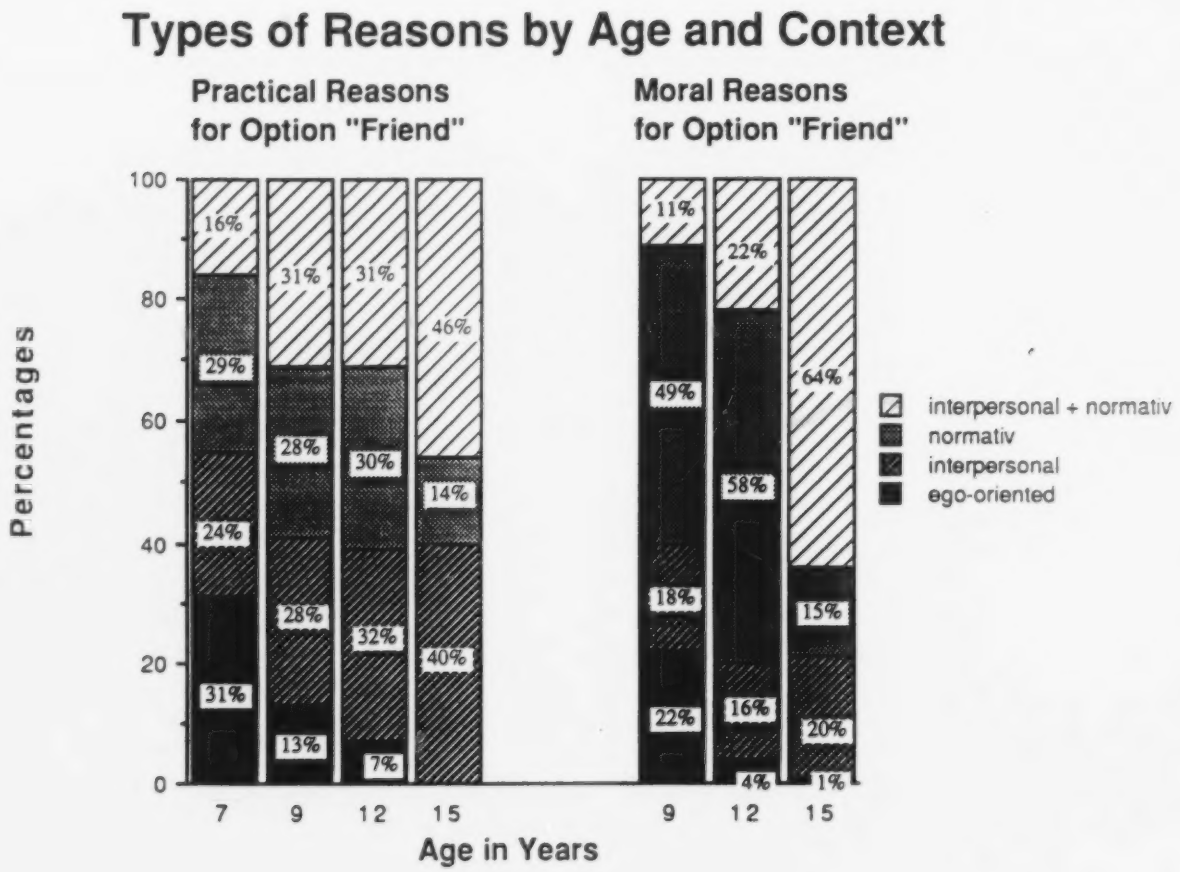
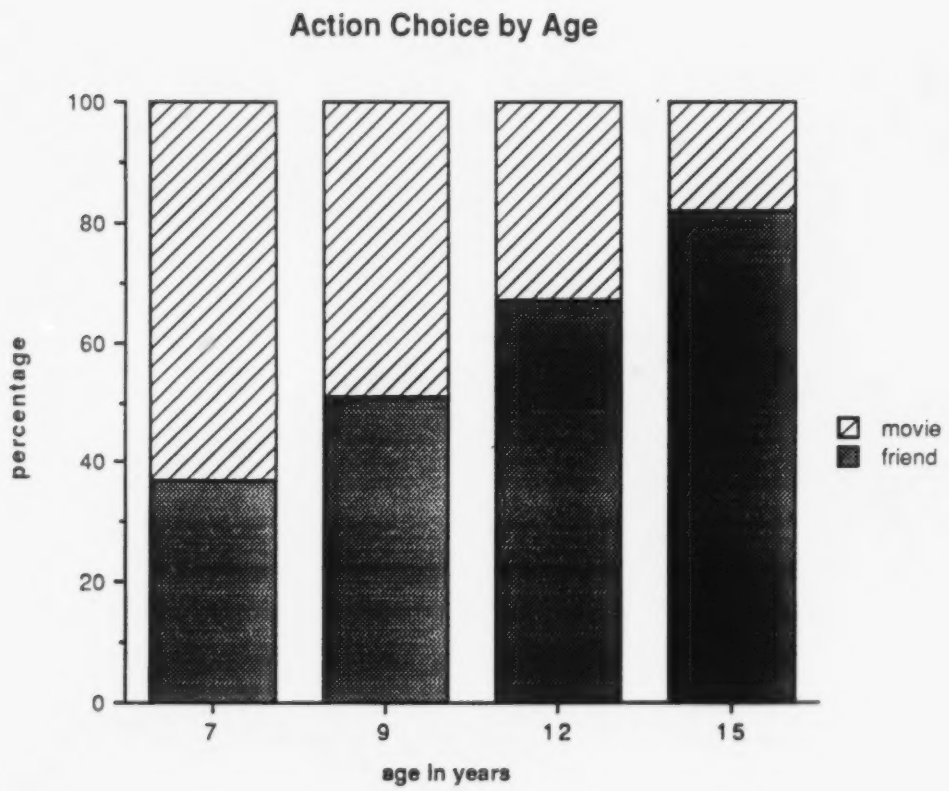

Types of Reasons by Age and Context
Practical Reasons for Option "Friend"
Moral Reasons for Option "Friend"
Percentages
100
80
60
40
20
0
16%
29%
24%
31%
31%
28%
28%
13%
31%
30%
32%
7%
46%
14%
40%
11%
49%
18%
22%
22%
58%
16%
4%
64%
15%
20%
1%
7
9
12
15
9
12
15
Age in Years
interpersonal + normativ
normativ
interpersonal
ego-oriented

Figure 3


Action Choice by Age
100
80
60
40
20
0
percentage
7
9
12
15
age in years
movie
friend